

# The TV Series *Medici*: Showcasing Brand-Italy through an International Co-Production

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Submitted: July 14, 2021 – Revised version: November 9, 2021

Accepted: April 27, 2022 – Published: July 14, 2022

## Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the tension between the global and local dimensions of Italian television products that circulate abroad through the analysis of a selection of production practices used in the Anglo-Italian tv series *Medici* (2016-2019). Grounding my work in a mixed methods approach which combines in-depth interviews conducted with key above-the-line professionals involved in the creative process of the series (producers, screenwriters, costume designers, cast directors, etc.) and an analysis of online official and grassroots discourses, this paper aims at investigating the strategies adopted by above-the-line creators in balancing the global and local dimensions of this series to appeal to both Italian and international audiences. Among these productive choices I will discuss casting strategies, the use of a crime plot to build the narrative, and the branding of Italy as the cradle of the Renaissances. My findings reveal that *Medici* showcases brand-Italy through a multiplicity of productive aspects from organizational practices to specific textual narrative choices, which allowed the series to have access to the global market.

**Keywords:** Medici; Brand-Italy; Production Culture; Italian TV Series; International Circulation of Italian Culture.

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## 1 Introduction

The TV series *Medici* aired for the first time on Rai 1 in 2016 and it comprises three seasons or chapters: *Medici: Masters of Florence* (Rai 1, 2016) followed by two chapters dedicated to Lorenzo: *Medici: The Magnificent* part one (Rai 1, 2018-2019), and part two (Rai 1, 2019) and the more recent airing of *Leonardo* (Rai 1, 2021)<sup>1</sup>. It is an Anglo-Italian coproduction that right from the beginning aimed to enter the international market assembling internationally renowned professionals such as Frank Spotnitz and Nicholas Mayer, and attracting from the start global distributors such as Netflix (*Medici* is the first TV series produced by Rai to be distributed as a Netflix Original series),<sup>2</sup> Amazon Prime Video (UK) and Beta Films, which distributed the series in several European countries.<sup>3</sup> Building on the themes explored in the broader national research project (PRIN) *Italian Na(rra)tives: The International Circulation of Brand Italy in the Media*, this paper aims at exploring the tension between the global and local dimensions of Italian television products that circulate abroad through the analysis of a selection of production practices adopted in *Medici*.

The questions that run through this paper are: From the production standpoint, which strategies have been adopted to attract transnational audiences? What elements in the production process have played an important role in balancing the global and local dimensions of this series? When creating an audiovisual product for the international market, how do the production practices of Italian TV seriality change? What image of Italy circulates abroad through the TV series *Medici*? In this paper I propose to explore these questions starting from some preliminary considerations emerged from cross-referencing the data collected through in-depth interviews conducted with key above-the-line professionals involved in the creative process of the series (producers, screenwriters, costume designers, cast directors, etc.) and an analysis of online official and grassroots discourses. My preliminary findings reveal that the positive transnational attention that *Medici* received<sup>4</sup> can be traced back to specific choices and strategies implemented at the production level to meet the quality standards of the international market. Among these productive choices I will focus primarily on casting practices, the use of a crime plot to build the narrative, and the branding of Italy as the cradle of the Renaissance obtained through a visual synthesis of the architecture and artwork of Italian cultural heritage. Therefore, I posit that *Medici* showcases brand-Italy through a multiplicity of productive aspects from organizational practices to specific textual narrative choices, which allowed the series to access the global market and attract transnational audiences.

## 2 Methodology

The research involved a combination of interviews to key above-the-line creators, and digital ethnography conducted on critics' reviews and viewers' comments. Since the research commenced during the Covid-19 pandemic the ethnographic interviews had to be conducted either over the phone or through Zoom as mobility was heavily restricted in Italy. The impossibility to conduct fieldwork and meet the professionals in their working environment was countered by adopting a triangulation technique that involved the cross-referencing of different discourses and registers resulting from the combination of interviews and a digital ethnography on viewer's reception (Caldwell 2008). Because the productive choices concerned different domains (i.e. organizational, textual and narrative), this work employs a mixed methods research, which allows to combine the analysis of data collected through quantitative procedures and from qualitative interviews (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2018; Merrington et al. 2019). This approach was instrumental in highlighting the correspondences

1. The TV series *Leonardo* must be considered as an independent product, however it was referred to in the interviews as part of the broader Renaissance saga that Lux Vide is envisioning.
2. It was primarily distributed by Netflix in UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, India and Taiwan.
3. Beta Film distributed the series in Germany (Sky), Spain (Telefonica Movistar+), SFR/Altice Group for French-Speaking Belgium and Luxembourg, Latin America (Sony Pictures Television); Poland (Canal+). The Series was also sold in 2017 to Asia (China, BlueMedia Times; the Philippines, ABS-CBN; South Korea, Green Narea Media, etc.) reaching over 100 territories.
4. The series was rated by users on IMDb an average of 7.9/10 with the highest scores appointed by the age group 18-29; Viewers on Amazon Prime Video UK gave the series a score of 4.5/5 (71%); On Coming Soon, Italian viewers rated the series 4.13/5; On RAI 1 the broadcasting of the first season averaged 6.676 million viewers, the second season averaged 3.969 million viewers, and season three 3.867 million viewers.

between the different issues that emerge at the reception level and the concerns/interests of the above-the-line-professionals.

More specifically, the first step involved an analysis of the comments and reviews of English-speaking spectators.<sup>5</sup> Following the approach developed in a previous work (Bisoni and Farinacci, 2020), I collected and analyzed critics' reviews from major newspapers and magazines, blogs, online viewers comments including those included in the *Medici Ambassador* campaign.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, I analyzed 1602 comments, (Amazon Prime Video UK 50; IMDb 132; Rotten Tomatoes 13; Google comments 247; Reddit 1133) and 87 review articles and blogposts (USA 70 blogs and 8 newspapers; UK 7 newspapers and 8 blogs). This first inquiry helped to identify the most discussed aspects of the series, which were helpful in identifying possible avenues of interest to be investigated/compared/refuted during the interviews (Horst and Miller 2012, Jenkins 2006, Kozinets 2015). From this first analysis three main aspects emerged as recurring topics of interest and critique among the viewers: the use of an internationally renowned cast, the fictional crime narrative to frame the TV series, and the exploitation of Italian art and settings.

Secondly, I proceeded with contacting members from the Italian and British/American production companies. Specifically, I interviewed Rai producer Fania Petrocchi, Lux Vide creative producer Luisa Cotta Ramosino, Showrunner Frank Spotniz (Big Light Productions), costume designer Alessandro Lai, screenwriters Francesco Arlanch, James Dormer, casting director Chiara Natalucci, and assistant casting director Aurelia Tamburrino. I decided to adopt a "studying down" approach (Mayer 2008; see also Nader 1969) which involved getting in contact primarily with the producers and creatives. This choice stemmed from two main reasons. The first is linked to the intention to investigate the representations of Italy that producers wished to convey of Italy through *Medici*. To achieve this goal, I needed to interact with key professionals who took the major creative decisions for the show. The second reason is tied to the obstacles encountered during my first interview. In order to work around the "usually highly coded, managed, and inflected" (Caldwell 2008: 2; Barra 2016; Mayer 2011, 2017) discourse shared by higher ranking professionals working within the industry, I conducted my first interview with the assistant casting director. Despite the abundance of information that she shared with me, it was clear that to acquire the bigger picture on specific casting decisions, I needed to work my way up the "chain of command". I thus decided to contact Rai producer Fania Petrocchi who became a privileged informant and introduced me to several of her colleagues from the other production companies. After establishing a trusting relationship with these higher-ranking figures, I was granted access to most of the members of the Italian and Anglo-American production teams.

The discourse shared by the above-the-line creators exposed an interesting interviewer-interviewee dynamic, which sheds light on the current relationship between the academia and the professionals working in the film industry. More than reflecting the "meeting between professionals" dynamic described Hanne Bruun (2016: 142; see also Kraub 2018: 48), what emerged from my interactions with these key professionals is a wish to turn to the legitimizing gaze of the academia to confirm the validity of their work. I was thus not considered as a fellow professional, but as an agent of the cultural context of which universities are still considered to be the keepers. Due to this peculiar expectation, the interviews disclosed an unexpected wealth of information that might have been otherwise inaccessible. One example is the overt desire to explain the much-debated creative choices to include anachronistic locations in some of the episodes. Rai, as it might be expected, was particularly adamant to explain the reasons for said decision. This is just one instance of the different aspects that the adopted methodology allowed to unearth.

### 3 Balancing National and International Demands

International co-productions have acquired increasing relevance in promoting the national identity and cultural heritage of numerous countries around the world (Scaglioni 2020; Scaglioni and Barra 2013; Corsi 2012; Garofalo and Holdaway 2018; Brembilla 2020, Holdaway and Scaglioni 2018). The transnational circulation

5. The decision to focus on English sources stems from the distribution pattern on the series which both through Netflix and Amazon Prime Video invested predominantly English-speaking territories as stated in the introduction.

6. <https://mediciseries.tumblr.com/post/620361122740125696/apply-now-medici-fans-we-heard-you-and-we-have> (last accessed 08/10/21).

of such audiovisual products impacts both the production practices and representation strategies adopted by the creative industries to appeal to different markets and audiences. Regarding Italian co-productions, both textual and productive elements incorporate global and local elements. From a textual perspective the representations of Italian identity and history, emphasize a *glocal* dimension (Damrosh 2009) which incorporates both global and local stylistic and narrative elements: they “treat local matters for a global audience [...] or they can emphasize a movement from the outside world in, presenting their locality as a microcosm of global exchange” (Damrosh, 2009: 9. See also Bisoni and Farinacci 2020). Let us think for example about products such as *Il Commissario Montalbano* (1999) (Benvenuti 2020; Nerenberg 2020), which features iconic images of Italian cultural identity linked to famous touristic locations. On the other hand, we have products that narrate stories that are rooted in specific national territories but that are at the same time exposed to global influences such as the universalistic coming of age narrative set in 1950s Naples of *My Brilliant Friend* (2018-).

From a productive standpoint, Italian TV seriality must measure up both to the global standards of quality TV as well as to the demands of international players that govern the market, as is the case with big distributing companies and on demand platforms (Barra e Scaglioni 2015; Boni 2015; Buonanno 2012, 2013; Cardini 2016; Cucco 2018; Kraub 2018; Martina e Palmieri 2015; Renga 2018). Differently from the American contest, which for decades has set the standards of quality TV (Nelson 2007; Geraghty 2003; Caldwell 2007; Brunsdon 2008), in Italy examples of good television gained this recognition “owning to their good-to-high standards of craftsmanship, their compelling dramatization of the subject matter and their contribution to the knowledge and memory of Italian history society and culture” (Buonanno 2013: 184).

Against this backdrop, the leading Italian production company Lux Vide with its partner Rai drew on the expertise and fame of professionals such as Frank Spotniz (chief executive of Big Light Production, third producing partner on this project) as showrunner and head writer, screenwriters such as Nicholas Mayer and James Dormer, internationally renowned musicians such as Paolo Bonvino and Francesco Frigeri as scenographer. Furthermore, it featured a majority of English-speaking big-name actors including Dustin Hoffman, Richard Madden, Sean Bean, and David Bradley from *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019), and Daniel Sherman known by young audiences from *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011-2017).

The three producing partners faced a complex endeavor of cultural translation and balancing between different television cultures, different narrative structures, different writing processes, and a different target audience. The effort to measure itself against international television seriality required an adaptation of the production practices to different quality standards compared to the programs regularly broadcasted by Rai.

We had to try to understand how to produce [*Medici*] because it was a project in which Rai was heavily invested due to its strong ties to Italian cultural heritage. Thus, a product that maybe twenty years ago would have been written in Italian and made in Italy using only Italian funding, thanks to a shift in perspectives, the project was opened to the world, which led to a co-production, a vision that was also shared by Rai.<sup>7</sup>

As Lux Vide creative producer Luisa Cotta Ramosino reveals, *Medici* constituted an interesting project also for the national broadcaster as it focuses on a cherished and inspiring period in Italian history but, at the same time, it wanted to appeal to a wider transnational audience. Before *Medici*, Rai’s fictional production model was traditionally anchored “to recognizable forms of fiction [...] with an emphasis on celebratory biopics, social commitment and comedy” (Barra and Scaglioni 2015: 67) catering for an audience mainly composed of adult and middle-aged viewers. As stated by Rai producer Fania Petrocchi:

Consider the editing, it was an international type of editing, very fast-paced. It was a challenge from the point of view of the visual language because the editing was of an international kind and not that which is customarily adopted in domestic productions that appeal exclusively to a domestic market.<sup>8</sup>

The words of Rai’s producer, hint at some of the standards of quality TV deemed necessary for a serial production to hit the international market that also *Medici* needed to meet. As theorized by Milly Buonanno:

7. Luisa Cotta Ramosino, telephone interview conducted on 26/01/21.

8. Fania Petrocchi, telephone interview conducted on 10/12/20.

“The tradition of quality in Italian TV drama has been built on a number of features: short narrative form, cinematographic pedigree, higher production costs, a potential for internationalization, a ‘must-see’ event status, reality-based subjects, the targeting of a general public” (2013: 183). It is precisely by employing a Production Studies perspective that we can shed light onto the different stakes held by the co-producing partners and reveal the tensions that arise between the different understandings of what quality TV means to the different parties and how this notion changes at the local and international level. The need to keep together both global and local elements in fact corresponds to different understanding of “quality”, a concept that in recent studies (Mittell 2015) has come to include a broad and rich variety of traits. Thus, engaging with this TV series through a production studies approach reveals how in co-productions there can be a tension between the different conceptions of quality at the global and local (national) level. In other words, it becomes apparent how the ideas/ideals of quality that Rai and the other Italian stakeholders hold, are in a state of constant check-and-balance with those upheld by the international professionals. In this sense the choice of actors, the employment of the crime genre, and a particular representation of the Renaissance can be understood as indicators of a specific notion of Italian quality both in terms of cultural/artistic identity and television productive practices. Let us now look more in detail at some of the strategies adopted by the Italian and Anglo-American production teams to mediate between these different standards.

### 3.1 Casting

The selection of the cast was discussed by the interviewed professionals as part of an important aspect to connect to different audiences. Diverse practices seem to have been adopted to negotiate between different productive requirements. Firstly, actors needed to speak English fluently to appeal to transnational audiences. Secondly, period dramas require, on the one hand, to respect specific international beauty standards and stardom logics. On the other, actors needed to embody the aesthetic qualities of specific iconic historical characters. All aspects that the local and international producers had to negotiate during the casting process.

In *Medici* Italian actors are relatively few compared to the international cast, which according to Rai’s producers is inevitable when working on a series that strives to be distributed globally: “Italian actors are still little known abroad and don’t speak English very well which becomes problematic since the Anglo-American markets refuse dubbing, thus the selection is fierce. The few that are selected are generally chosen by the main Italian broadcaster and by the main producer which is Lux Vide.”<sup>9</sup> The Italian cast was mostly residual:

There were cameos, for example Alessandro Preziosi who played Brunelleschi. Instead, Alessandro Sperduti studied in America and thus speaks English fluently and could play Piero the gouty, Cosimo’s son, which was a supporting role. Then his wife was also played by an Italian actress: Valentina Bellè who has an American mother. Therefore, these are the criteria when choosing Italian actors for such an international project.<sup>10</sup>

The issue of linguistic fluency constitutes a central concern in Italian international co-productions such as *Medici* that are written and shot in English. Despite the Italian setting of the story, for English-speaking audiences the credibility and authenticity of the series is discussed in terms of accents as it emerges in the following three viewers who commented the series on IMDb: “The casting of Dustin Hoffman as Giovanni was a real head-scratcher. His accent and demeanor did not mesh with everything else [...]”<sup>11</sup> and “And can we just talk about how they all have different accents. What’s up with that?”<sup>12</sup> and “Accents are distracting. For a story about an Italian family, they certainly found enough British, American, Irish, Scottish, and Australian actors.”<sup>13</sup>

The linguistic capabilities are also closely connected to another aspect: the limited notoriety that Italian actors have abroad as stated by showrunner Frank Spotniz:

9. Fania Petrocchi.

10. Fania Petrocchi.

11. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5057130/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_rt](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5057130/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt) (posted on 08/01/2017).

12. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5057130/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_rt](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5057130/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt) (posted on 15/12/2016).

13. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5057130/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_rt](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5057130/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt) (posted on 23/04/2019).

If you are trying to reach a huge international audience, there aren't that many Italian stars who can do that right now. [Aside from] Roberto Benigni, and Giancarlo Giannini there aren't that many names that are going to cut through the English-speaking world and so I am sure this is why it was shot in English and why they approached English-speaking writers like me and why we use English-speaking cast. I think that Luca [Bernabei] was determined to have a big star playing Giovanni because he wanted the eyes of the world on the show and so we got Dustin Hoffman.<sup>14</sup>

As casting director Chiara Natalucci revealed, language fluency played such a central role in the casting process that in some specific cases the language coach would be asked for a consult in order to decide whether an actor could reach an appropriate level of proficiency: “when we liked an actor a lot but we weren't very sure of his English, we would ask the actor to work with a language coach to get ready for the audition and we would rely on the opinion of the coach tell us if the actor had reached a good enough level [to be casted].”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to meeting the linguistic demands required by the international co-production, the selection of specific actors was also strategic: “having actors like Dustin Hoffman who no one would ever have imagined that he would agree to come to Italy to shoot a series and that he could be the head of the Medici family; this for us has proven to be a central element for the success of the series.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the actors that were cast needed to be memorable, but they also needed to “have meaning for part of the audience like Richard Madden that the audience knew because he had just shot *Cinderella* (Kenneth Branagh, 2015) and he had also starred in *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019)”. The cast thus needed to appeal both to audiences of different nationalities and age groups:

If I choose young actors who are known by a younger audience, perhaps this younger audience in order to follow their favorite actor will watch the whole *Medici* TV series. It then becomes a matter of promotion, like in the case of actress Aurora Ruffino who is very talented and certainly very young, and — just like the case of Sean Bean who brings the audience from the *Game of Thrones* — she brings the audience from *Braccialetti Rossi*.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the choice to select the cast in the case of *Medici* was connected to the demands of the international market, but at the same time to a desire of attracting a younger audience than the usual demographic of Rai's public: “when one makes an international product in general, he/she tries to give a fresher and younger image. There are many actors who work very well for the average Italian audience, but maybe nobody knows them abroad, so then the product has difficulties meeting the expectations abroad.”<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, given the emphasis of the TV series on celebrating Italian heritage, there were some roles that required a closer likeness to the artwork. This is the case of Simonetta Vespucci interpreted by Matilda Luz. Since Simonetta Vespucci was the muse who inspired the *Venere of Botticelli*, the casting process lasted a long time since the director needed “to find an actress to impersonate a very important beauty, an iconic figure who certainly had to stir something in the spectators; she had to be very beautiful but also not too modern a beauty”<sup>19</sup>. Thus, while for the Anglo-American team emphasis on actor's resemblance to the historical characters that they impersonated there was not a primary concern, the Italian casting director was more concerned as in her opinion “the Italian public, which is naturally accustomed, without even knowing it, to a certain type of oval [face], to associate a certain type of face to the Renaissance and would have thus noticed and disapproved of too modern a beauty.”<sup>20</sup> The talent of the actors was still the most important feature during the auditions, however as I have tried to point out, in *Medici* there were also a multiplicity of other aspects that needed to be taken into consideration first among them language fluency and era appropriate features.

14. Frank Spotniz, Zoom interview conducted on 05/02/21.

15. Chiara Natalucci, Zoom interview conducted on 14/06/21.

16. Luisa Cotta Ramosino.

17. Aurelia Tamburrino, telephone interview conducted on 26/11/20.

18. Aurelia Tamburrino.

19. Aurelia Tamburrino.

20. Chiara Natalucci.

In this first section dedicated to casting we start to get a sense for the complex dynamics of negotiation that must be set in place to produce a series that must meet the expectations of different audiences. Let us now look at the use of the conventions crime narratives to frame the episodes of *Medici*.

### 3.2 Exploiting the Success of Crime Narratives

Another productive aspect extensively discussed by viewers and critics was the use of a crime narrative as a narrative frame to recount the story of the Medici family. Also, in this specific case it is useful to start from the reactions of the public and to note how they correspond, ex-post, to concerns well present in the ex-ante production systems viewers' comments posted on Rotten Tomatoes and Amazon Prime Video (USA):

Why make a historical series if you do not portray history accurately? Is this intended to trick the audience, or make them stupider? For starters, there is no evidence that Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici was murdered. That was purely for entertainment purposes.<sup>21</sup>

It is not historical correct — far from it but I liked the mystery story, so it made up for the 'historical mistakes.' What I thought was a cliff hanger for series 2 turned out to be just an abrupt ending of the most interesting storyline — the murder mystery!<sup>22</sup>

As it emerges from these examples, the choice to use a crime narrative structure was often perceived either as an intriguing and engaging way to narrate the historical predicaments befallen on the Medici family or as a device that caused confusion and an adulteration of historical facts. However, the interviews revealed several reasons that led to the adoption of such a narrative frame at production level.

First, creating a period drama that wishes to portray historically accurate events while at the same time keeping the spectators engaged, requires the dramatic stakes to be high “this is the reason why so many things are about murder”<sup>23</sup> as series showrunner Frank Spotniz states. Rai producer Fania Petrocchi was also very adamant in explaining that they did not intend for *Medici* to become a documentary: “Our intention was to create a historical drama inspired by historical events and characters whose biographies were correctly conveyed.”<sup>24</sup> The strategy of framing the historical content within an *Amadeus*-like narrative was thus adopted by the screenwriters to keep the spectators engaged and to tap into the prominence of crime fiction among contemporary quality TV (especially those circulating on OTT platforms):

We sort of took a page from *Amadeus*, [...] which takes the conceit that Salieri murdered Mozart. Now that is most certainly not true yet, by having that fictitious frame into the story, you create a massive interest in Mozart and then, most of what is in that play and in that movie is in fact historically true. So, it is a fiction that allows you to access the historical truth [...] so it's almost certainly true that Giovanni de Medici was not murdered, but by creating that mystery, that frame, it allowed us to say things about the Medici that we thought were true.<sup>25</sup>

If we look at the current trends in TV series consumption in Europe, the genre that is currently most popular is crime (53%) followed by period drama (22%)<sup>26</sup>. Clearly the choice to frame the story within a spy story/thriller genre was closely connected to the audiovisual market trends and with the international audience's inclinations (Pagello 2020; Dall'Asta and Pagello 2021; Locatelli 2017). As Italian screenwriter Francesco Arlanch affirmed:

21. <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/medici/s01/reviews> [era: rottentomatoes.com/tv/medici\_masters\_of\_florence/s01/reviews?type=user] (posted on 31/01/2018).

22. [https://www.amazon.com/product-reviews/B074BL9P28/ref=acr\\_dpproductdetail\\_text?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1](https://www.amazon.com/product-reviews/B074BL9P28/ref=acr_dpproductdetail_text?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1) (posted on 05/05/2018).

23. Frank Spotniz.

24. Fania Petrocchi.

25. Frank Spotniz.

26. Data presented at the conference “Detecting Europe in Contemporary Crime Narratives: Print Fiction, Film, and Television” (21-23 June 2021, online). More information available at the Detect website <https://www.detect-project.eu/category/conference/> (last accessed 09/07/21).

The leap that made it possible to move from “classic Italian historical-biographical fiction” to a series that instead established itself on an international panorama on platforms, etc. this was possible by adopting mechanisms of an internationally recognizable genre: The mechanisms of the spy story, the mechanisms of the thriller, the mechanisms of crime. Frank Spotniz from the first season has given a clear crime setting to every single season because clearly crime is a genre that is internationally intelligible and interesting. Then within a crime mechanism we were able “to pour”, so to speak, the Italian historical content.<sup>27</sup>

This creative choice of structuring the running plot around the murder of Giovanni de’ Medici and including in the anthology plot minor crime-events, arose from the necessity to narrate historically accurate facts while keeping the tension through each season as the following comment in a thread on Reddit shows where the viewers are trying to figure out who is responsible for the murder:

Hmmm I don’t think that Cosimo was responsible for the assassination. There were repeated signs that Cosimo was strongly against murder, and those committed by the Medici family were all done by his underlings. In this case, none of his underlings seemed to object his decisions.<sup>28</sup>

Viewers also appreciated the fictionality of the crime plot and its potentials to draw the spectators into past contexts and events without losing the entertainment factor of the series as it emerges from a viewer’s comment on IMDb:

This is an excellent series it has all the features of a drama, suspense, crime, sex, slavery, and betrayal [...]. These types of series that are being produced allow you to see into the uninhibited antics of the past that everyone was taught were so holy these gives proof that sex, murder, betrayal where a great part of the European history as it is today.<sup>29</sup>

To support the crime narrative, fictitious characters were also added, such as Marcobello, to circumvent the restrictions imposed by history:

I think what was really helpful to us was the invention of the character Marcobello. He is the means for Cosimo to do evil things, sometimes without even Cosimo knowing, right? Marcobello would commit crimes without even telling Cosimo and that really helped fuel that crime storyline and it freed us of real history because he was a fictitious character, and he could operate below the radar. In season three it was the character of Bernardo who was the mirror image of Marcobello.<sup>30</sup>

As stated by Fania Petrocchi, Rai was particularly invested in preserving the historical accuracy and verisimilitude of the series, but at the same time it wished to set *Medici* apart from the more documentarist programs broadcasted on its channels. Interviewees appeared very adamant to explain that the aim was to create a fictional narrative that featured documented historical figures and events, but that was also the outcome of the artistic inspirations/inclinations of a team of transnational creators who had their own vision to make the show globally palatable. The interviewees often described the balancing act these two dimensions entailed an in-depth research (and consulting with historians) on those historical facts/aspect that could be bent to serve the demands of the audiovisual production and those that needed to be reported unchanged.

Rai has always fought to ensure that incorrect information was not conveyed to the public, rather we have omitted it. I’ll give you an example: during the first season, we omitted the presence of Cosimo’s favorite son who was Giovanni because dramaturgically it complicated the life of the authors, so from the series it seems that the only child is Piero, but there was an illegitimate son, Carlo and Giovanni, who was the favorite but died prematurely. These are the types of omissions

27. Francesco Arlanch, telephone interview conducted on 16/12/20.

28. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Medici\\_Netflix/comments/5lfolt/who\\_was\\_truly\\_behind\\_the\\_murder\\_of\\_spoiler/dcepyo/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Medici_Netflix/comments/5lfolt/who_was_truly_behind_the_murder_of_spoiler/dcepyo/) (posted on 08/11/2021).

29. [https://www.imdb.com/user/ur67732237/?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](https://www.imdb.com/user/ur67732237/?ref_=tt_urv) (posted on 20/02/2019).

30. Frank Spotniz.

that we made throughout the series because we had to give space to the main characters and above all we had to respect the format.<sup>31</sup>

To the viewers and critics who describe themselves as history buffs, these omissions and “bendings” of historical facts were interpreted more as historical mistakes rather than productive devices to fit with the parameters of specific formats, narrative objectives, and global distribution strategies. All the members of the production teams that I interacted with had clearly suffered from the heavy critiques that they received, especially from the Italian viewership, and oriented our conversations towards explaining and justifying their creative choices.

Through the different points of view that transpire from the interviews, we can once again see how the use of the crime genre created a tension between the different notions of “quality” held by the Italian and international producers. In this case the dyad ‘historical accuracy’ vs ‘captivating international audience’ points towards the juxtaposition between two different understanding of what constitutes quality TV. For Rai, which is the national broadcaster, the concept of quality is inextricable from the demands of producing audiovisual products that give a plausible representation of Italian cultural heritage and identity, thus trying to please first and foremost the expectations of critics and intellectuals. In the production process, these goals are balanced with Big Light Productions’ attention towards current standards of international quality TV following more of a “postmodern heritage film” perspective according to which “precepts of fact, truth and history carry the same status as invention, fable and myth, and any rigidity or distinction in relation to these terms collapses” (Stone 2016: 259).

Let us delve now into the third and final strategy that was adopted to entice foreign audiences to watch *Medici*: showcasing recognizable images of Italy’s Renaissance artwork and architecture.

### 3.3 Showcasing Italy as the Cradle of the Renaissance

Another aspect that emerged from the interviews with the professionals was the showcasing of Italy as the champion of the Renaissance and of Western culture: “the *Medici* saga celebrates Italy and celebrates the Renaissance, the achievements not just of Italy but of Western civilization, that’s one of the high points of Western civilization.”<sup>32</sup> As also screenwriter James Dormer confirms this intension: “although it is an Italian story its’ a part of the world’s story, we never felt like *Medici* was some small Italian story.”<sup>33</sup>

Luca Bernabei’s decision to shoot the series entirely in Italy also played a very crucial role in the valorization and branding of the nation as the cradle of the arts and of Western Culture as we know it today. The series in fact was shot in over thirty locations in Tuscany, in Lazio, and in Lombardy showcasing historical buildings and works of art such as the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome, Palazzo Farnese in Caprarola, Palazzo dei Priori in Volterra, Palazzo Piccolomini in Pienza, Palazzo Tè in Mantua, the Ninfeo of Villa Giulia, the Basilica of San Biagio outside Montepulciano, just to name a few.<sup>34</sup> The increased production value gained through location shooting became one of the critical issues raised by viewers, historians and art historians who noticed anachronisms in the architecture and artwork that was chosen as the backdrop of some of the episodes.

Rai producer was eager to explain how the inclusion of posthumous artwork in the series was part of a deliberate creative choice and not the result of gross historical mistakes:

With regard to settings, to celebrate the whole Italian Renaissance, we preferred real locations even at the expense of some anachronism, because although the interior, for example, of the Palazzo della Cancelleria was frescoed in the late Sixteenth century we still filmed there Cosimo [...] It was a conscious artistic choice.<sup>35</sup>

31. Fania Petrocchi.

32. Frank Spotniz.

33. James Dormer.

34. For a run-through of the locations of the series see <https://www.finestresullarte.info/opere-e-artisti/dieci-location-serie-tv-i-medici-3> (last accessed 10/07/21).

35. Fania Petrocchi.

From this interview emerges how a “visual synthesis” of the artworks of the Italian Renaissance was applied in *Medici*. The artistic choice of reconstructing the entire period of the Italian Renaissance for the viewers has made some iconic places protagonists, first among them the Duomo of Florence. The entire first season follows the construction of its dome, a functional choice to attract the attention of the international market. In fact, the pictorial and architectural works featured in all four chapters are recognizable and known by transnational audiences and are used as real branding devices to activate a cultural curiosity and a tourist attraction (Nerenberg 2020). Moreover, numerous aerial shots of the Tuscan countryside such as the Val d’Orcia, part of the UNESCO world heritage list, have been used as a backdrop in the series, which are part of a shared imaginary of Italy abroad.

The showcasing of Italian excellence doesn’t stop at its architectural and artistic heritage, but it is also accentuated through its renowned fashion industry and artisanal craftsmanship displayed in the creation of the show’s costumes. Alessandro Lai drew the inspiration for his costumes from contemporary renowned fashion designers such as Valentino who also created Renaissance-inspired line of clothing. Furthermore, in the production of *Medici* numerous Italian ateliers and artisans were employed to create the many costumes, shoes, and accessories that, as Lai himself comments: “were never enough. You had to dress people with continuous garments so you could not repeat the same designs twice because otherwise it would not have conveyed the glamor and richness of the production” inevitably “forcing the realism of the time period since at the time people lived an entire existence with a maximum of ten dresses.”<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly the costumes became part of an exhibit hosted at the Palazzo Medici Ricciardi in Florence.<sup>37</sup> Centering the narrative around national monuments, iconic artwork and fashion places *Medici* within those historical dramas that act as an “international ‘shop window’ that can help support not only the domestic industry but also the wider heritage and tourist sector by attracting international visitors to the country” (Banger, Cooke and Stone 2016: xvii).

It becomes apparent that choosing the more costly and organizationally challenging option of shooting in “real” places allowed to showcase the architectural and national heritage at the expense of strict philological accuracy, which still appeal to transnational audiences:

The Tuscan landscape, which functions as the main backdrop for air shots and rural settings, Brunelleschi’s dome, Botticelli’s Venus, etc., are part of the shared touristic representation of the nation. Tuscany is a brand that sells itself and is already familiar to foreign publics. The choice to narrate the construction of the dome of the Duomo in the first season was a way to work on something with which an international audience was extremely familiar and at the same time we were telling the audience: ‘Do you see how it was born? It was born from the spirit of a man.’<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the discourse shared by above-the-line creators, particularly by the producers, was to showcase Italian heritage in order to appeal to international audiences and encourage film-induced tourism (Barra and Cucco 2018; Busby and Haines 2013; Dallen and Boyd 2006) as Fania Petrocchi reveals: “I hope that from the tourist point of view, when the pandemic will end, tourists may return to the cities that we portrayed.”<sup>39</sup>

In *Medici*, thus, national reputation is built around the myth of Italy as the cradle of culture, art, creativity, and style allowing the series to function as one of those cultural phenomena that fall under the label of “Renaissance Effect” (Belfanti 2019). This TV series, similarly to heritage cinema, builds on this nostalgic and idealistic view of the nation’s glorious past which is ascribed almost entirely to the deeds of the Medici family as the sole champions and endorsers of the Renaissance (Cooke and Stone 2016; Higson 1993).

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36. Alessandro Lai.

37. “Gli abiti de ‘I Medici’ in mostra a Firenze” <http://www.palazzomediciriccardi.it/project/gli-abiti-de-i-medici-in-mostra-a-firenze/> (last accessed 12/07/21).

38. Luisa Cotta Ramosino.

39. Fania Petrocchi.

## 4 Conclusions

Focusing the ongoing research on the productive aspects of the TV series *Medici* offers the possibility to highlight some of the perceived challenges that Italian audiovisual productions must face to appeal to wide transnational audiences and find the balance between with the different standards of international quality tv. When comparing the interviews with the Italian, American, and British members of the production team, at least three issues emerge: (1) the dearth of Italian contemporary actors that can fluently speak English, which results in a lack of notoriety abroad; (2) how the need for the Rai to preserve/safeguard the authenticity of Italy's national past when narrating stories concerning the nation's cultural heritage still results in restrictions of creative freedom; (3) the notion that Italy's brand is still strongly connected to its cultural and artistic past: Destinations such as Tuscany and personalities linked to our artistic and cultural heritage such as Brunelleschi, Botticelli, and Leonardo, therefore, seem to be more than ever part of the pantheon of promoters of brand-Italy abroad. Furthermore, these three analyzed aspects can be interpreted as indicators of a different understanding of the standards of quality TV thus expanding the notion of the dichotomy between local and global productive practices.

The cultural assets placed at the center of these TV series, are aimed at promoting a recognizable and mythologized image of Italy rooted in a glorious past thus relying on the allure of a "Renaissance Effect", which can be traced back to the second half of the Nineteenth century, but that somehow still needs the support of the expertise of Anglo-American professionals, be it the showrunners, screenwriters, or actors to be successfully narrated and exported. The discourse shared by the professionals, in fact, reveals how their perception of the Italian audiovisual production industry is still strongly marked by restrictions when it comes to the portrayal of Italy's heritage and of historical events more generally; how the Italian stardom system is still circumscribed to the national borders and how Italy's glamorous past is still a best-seller abroad. Future developments of this research will encompass other elements of tension between the local/global dimensions discussed in this paper such as the impact of a transnational writers' room (i.e. featuring both Italian and English native speakers) affected the screenwriting process or how the creative process was affected by the practice of starting to film only when all the episodes have been written (customary in the Italian TV culture) versus filming episode by episode (more common in the US). These are some aspects that the above-the-line-creators mentioned and could merit further investigation.

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